



## DISASTER RELIEF PROVIDED BY VOLUNTEERS IN NORTHEAST ALABAMA

by Sammie Jo Barstow

“To give a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name,” is the ministry goal of Southern Baptist disaster relief efforts. In Alabama, more than 5,400 men and women have been trained to answer the call for help when disaster strikes anywhere in North America or around the world.

According to David Patty, Director of Missions for Sand Mountain Association and District 2 Coordinator for Disaster Relief, meeting physical needs of people in crisis is one of the most practical ways Christians can show the love of Jesus. “I always tell people that we are here to serve you in Jesus’ name.”

Some find it hard to believe that people would travel great distances and do such hard physical work without charge. Patty recalls driving up to the house of an elderly widow after a fierce storm had wrecked havoc on her community. She had two large trees down on her property, one having fallen across an outbuilding.



One of the men from the Sand Mountain team offered to cut up the trees and drag off the debris. “Oh, no,” she said. “I can’t afford it. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” She was so discouraged because she had no money and just minutes before, a private business had offered to cut the trees for a charge of \$4,500.

“Ma’am, we’re volunteers. We do this for free,” said the team member. “One way we serve our Lord is by serving other people for free.” The team proceeded to cut the trees and clear her yard. According to Patty, “We even left her some firewood! She was just in tears when we left because she was so appreciative.”

The seven associations in District 2 (Marshall, Tennessee River, DeKalb, Etowah, Lookout Mountain, Cherokee, Blount, Friendship, and Sand Mountain) all have volunteers trained in various aspects of disaster relief. These team members have been deployed to Texas, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Florida. On numerous occasions they’ve served closer to home in Alabama after tornadoes and storms have passed through leaving a path of downed trees, flood damage, and uninhabitable housing.

Generally, feeding teams may be the first responders to a disaster, providing meals to people left homeless. Chain saw/cleanup/recovery teams work to clear debris and do whatever is necessary to begin restoring the property. This includes cutting trees, clearing fallen limbs, and removing mud and water from structures by removing carpet and cutting away water-logged sheetrock.

In addition to chain saw and feeding, teams are trained for a variety of purposes including child care, administration, communications, shower and laundry units, and chaplaincy. Of the 40 trained volunteers in Sand Mountain Association, Patty said at least 15 are women. "I always tease the men that our women can outwork us. They do everything just like the men do, dragging brush and cleaning mud out of buildings."

Disaster teams are trained to recognize dangerous mold and bacteria and also to deal with animals that inhabit disaster areas. When buildings are flooded, animals frequently are washed into the building and remain when the water subsides. On one occasion, Patty and his team killed three snakes inside one building.

The joy of helping people in distress and the blessings his teams receive cannot be measured, said Patty. Dwight Everett, Director of Missions for Tennessee River Association, agreed. "Our teams will go and do extremely hard work under difficult conditions, but they all come back and say they would be ready to go again the next day!" said Everett. "I think they want one night's sleep in their own bed and they're ready to go again."

For the most part, disaster relief volunteers pay their own expenses. Patty said his association pays travel for anyone taking a vehicle and buys necessary equipment. Occasionally, in years where numerous opportunities have drained the budget, he has asked churches for a special love offering. "They have always responded generously," he said.

Recently, Patty wanted to find a way to minister to children during disasters. "They've lost their bikes or other toys and are feeling insecure. We wanted to come up with something to help the children." He sent letters to the 30 churches of his association asking them to pack gallon-size zip-closed bags with small toys, crayons, coloring books, toy cars or small dolls. The response was "overwhelming," said Patty.

One lady in his association had collected Beanie Babies for years with her husband. After her husband's death, she was searching for a place to donate the collection. The children's gift bags were the answer. Patty says she donated numerous large plastic containers full of Beanie Babies to be used for the project. Women on Mission groups in the association responded by gathering articles and filling hundreds of gift bags.

Of course, serving others in practical ways frequently leads to being able to share the gospel with the people they help. Patty recalled a recent time when their chain saw team had cut several trees from the yard of an elderly man. He was expressing his gratitude to Donnie Johnston, a team member, and Johnston asked, "Sir, has anyone ever talked with you about spiritual matters?"

"No, not really," the gentleman replied.

"Do you mind if we talk about that?" asked Johnston.

Johnston and the man walked back to the porch, sat down, and Johnston shared his testimony. The man prayed to receive Jesus. “When that happens, it’s a powerful experience for the whole team,” said Patty.

Mel Johnson, Coordinator of Disaster Relief for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, believes that “these volunteers are some of the greatest people in the world. They will volunteer their time, talent, and treasure at a moment’s notice to go wherever it takes to respond to folks in disaster. Under normal circumstances, when people would not be receptive to an evangelism team going through a neighborhood, when their world is in chaos, and we show up and provide hope in a seemingly hopeless situation, they want to know why we’re there. It’s a great opportunity to share Jesus.”

Johnson said, “Disaster Relief is but one of many Great Commission ministries that could not exist apart from the generosity and commitment of Cooperative Program financial support. It is without question that Alabama’s rise to become a pace setter among state conventions in Disaster Relief is due, in no small part, to the Cooperative Program, which provides a means to supply training, equipment, relief supplies and much more. This generosity from churches across the state offers hope for those who are helpless to make a difference that can last for eternity.”

Southern Baptist disaster relief efforts in the past few years have received considerable media coverage for responding to disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina, Ike, Gustav, as well as traveling to other continents to minister during times of flood and earthquakes. “Yes, now they know us,” said Patty. “They see our yellow hats and t-shirts and they know we’re going to help them and that we work without charge.”

Pray specifically for disaster relief efforts and volunteers in these ways:

- For more volunteers. Training is available at Shocco Springs Conference Center annually in April and, by request, in individual associations. Call Mel Johnson, Disaster Relief Coordinator at the Alabama State Board of Missions, at 1-800-264-1225 for more information. Other information is available at [www.alsbom.org/dr](http://www.alsbom.org/dr).
- For safety of volunteers who often work in dangerous situations.
- For ministry opportunities. Pray for hearts to be open to receiving the gospel as a result of seeing love extended in practical ways through disaster relief teams.

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